

S-E-C-R-E-T

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

7 January 1966

STAFF MEMORANDUM NO. 2-66

SUBJECT: Communist Chinese Intervention in the Vietnam War

NOTE FOR THE BOARD

This is a redraft of the Memo the Board reviewed on 21 December. It is intended to become a Memorandum for the Director in response to his request for a paper on this subject.

GROUP I
Excluded from automatic
Downgrading and
Declassification

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

C E N T R A L I N T E L L I G E N C E A G E N C Y

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

7 January 1966

STAFF MEMORANDUM NO. 2-66

SUBJECT: Communist Chinese Intervention in the Vietnam War

THE PROBLEM

In this paper we assume that Communist China intervenes in the Vietnamese war with substantial numbers of combat ground or air forces. We examine Chinese intentions and world reactions.

DISCUSSIONS

I. CHINESE INTENTIONS

1. The Communist Chinese have promoted two apparently contradictory lines regarding the probable future course of the US in the Vietnam war. For a long time, especially within the context of the Sino-Soviet dispute, they have insisted that the US is a paper tiger lacking the stamina to maintain a prolonged

GROUP I
Excluded from automatic
Downgrading and
Declassification

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

counter-insurgency effort. They argue that a properly conducted "people's war" can defeat the US forces and US-supported local forces without serious risk of a major international war. They also contend, however, that the US is desperately trying to expand the war and is determined to destroy the DRV and to attack China. This line, which is directed especially at Western Europe, Japan, and domestic opinion in the US, has recently been stressed in Chinese propaganda and conversations with foreign visitors.

2. We believe that China's leaders give both lines some credence. They almost certainly still cling to the belief that US resistance will crumble in a prolonged test of wills. But they have had to extend their estimate of the breaking point further up the line of escalation than they had once expected. They appear to be increasingly anxious that the US may be determined to go a long way, possibly including attacks on China. Nevertheless, they cling to their hope that world and domestic US opinion will force the US to halt before a Sino-US war develops, and they have scrupulously avoided initiatives likely to provoke US attacks on China.

3. The assumed intervention by Chinese combat forces might take a wide variety of forms and occur in a wide variety of

- 2 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

circumstances. Basically, however, the Chinese would be pursuing one of two alternative strategies. The first is a limited course of generating controlled pressures on the US/GVN while avoiding outright war with the US; probably this would require China to limit its intervention to the territory of North Vietnam. The second is a course of deliberately seeking out and trying to defeat US forces in battle on the ground in the South and, perhaps, in Laos and Thailand and/or in the air over the North. Quite different Chinese analyses of the situation and calculations of risk would underly the two strategies.

4. The Limited Strategy. As long as Peking clings to its paper-tiger estimate of the US, it might believe that a substantial movement of Chinese Communist combat forces into North Vietnam would produce a combination of pressures on the US/GVN sufficient to force an end to the conflict on terms favorable to the Communists. This move would involve the release of large PAVN forces for use in the South, confronting the US with the prospect of increased casualties and an indefinite prolongation of the war there. Beyond this, the Chinese Communist leaders would calculate that the heightened prospect of a Sino-US war would spread such alarm both within the US and abroad that enormous pressures would be brought upon the US Government to temporize in Vietnam.

- 3 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

5. In adopting such a course of action, the Chinese would probably have estimated that, as long as their troops remained in North Vietnam, the chances of precipitating a direct Sino-US war were small. They would be consciously accepting some risk of such a war, however, and would have made preparations for it.

6. The Strategy of Direct Combat. Alternatively, Peking might choose to intervene in a direct effort to defeat US forces in the field. If the Chinese Communists embarked on this strategy, it would probably indicate that they had concluded the US was determined to continue escalating and that a Sino-US war was inevitable. Under these conditions, the Chinese leaders might deem it wise to choose the time and place of fighting and to try to keep at least the ground war as far from Chinese territory as possible.

7. The implementation of such a strategy could take a range of forms. At the low end would be limited Chinese incursions into Northern Laos and Northern Thailand, designed to force the US to come and meet them in response to its existing commitments. Peking would hope that this would dissipate US Southeast Asian strength over a wide area on long supply lines, while the specter of a prolonged and indefinitely enlarged war would multiply international and domestic pressures on the US to pull out.

- 4 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

8. At the upper end of the range of possibilities is a Chinese offensive to drive the US out of Southeast Asia by engaging it heavily over a wide front in an all-out war. The Chinese would face formidable logistic difficulties in executing such a campaign. These difficulties have weighed heavily in our previous estimates that the chances of direct Chinese intervention are less than even and that a massive Chinese attack on US forces in South Vietnam is highly unlikely. But we cannot be certain that Chinese strategists take the same view. In deciding to challenge the US as assumed here, they might have judged that they could operate on a highly austere basis, that prepositioned supplies in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia would meet many of their requirements, and that the enemy could not sustain a prolonged conflict.

9. In any case, the direct use of Chinese troops against US forces would involve the prospect of US attacks on Communist China. By adopting such a course, Peking would have indicated it was prepared to accept such attacks. The Chinese leaders would probably estimate that the US would begin by using conventional weapons on the transportation choke points in south China and air installations there and on Hainan Island. This, they would expect, would be accompanied by a blockade of

- 5 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

south-bound Chinese Communist shipping and, perhaps, attacks on Chinese ports of entry. As the Chinese expanded the scale of their movement southward to involve sending major forces into Laos and Thailand, they would probably estimate the US response would be a wider-ranging conventional attack on Chinese military and economic targets and advanced weapons facilities. They might also see some chance that the US would attempt an invasion of the Red River Delta area of North Vietnam.

10. Beyond this, the Chinese Communists would foresee the possibility of a US nuclear attack, perhaps first with tactical weapons on military targets, then with strategic weapons. They would probably believe, however, that the US would be extremely reluctant to once again initiate the use of nuclear weapons for any reason short of imminent peril to the safety of the US itself. Additionally, they might rely to some extent on their professed belief that such weapons are not so decisive as to make it too costly to drive the US out of Southeast Asia, considering the changed balance of power this would bring about.

11. In any case, even in this more belligerent scenario, the Chinese leaders would count heavily on their belief that fear of a nuclear Third World War would have generated irresistible

- 6 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

pressures on the US Government to end its escalation somewhere far short of the stages where the use of nuclear weapons became likely.

II. FOREIGN REACTIONS

12. The first news of a major movement of Chinese combat forces southward would produce a wave of extreme consternation and would generate heavy pressure on the US to do whatever was necessary to avert a Sino-American war. A major exception would be the GRC, where hopes of a return to the mainland would soar. There would also be attempts by various nations to get Peking to call off its troop movements, but none consider themselves in a position to exert much influence there. The Soviet Union has the greatest capability. It could warn that it would not come to the rescue if China provoked a nuclear bombing, and it could even maneuver troops along the Sino-Soviet border. Whether Moscow would apply such pressures would depend in large part upon what led up to the Chinese action and whether the Soviets believed China would and could control the situation sufficiently to avoid a Sino-US war. Australia and Canada might threaten to cut off grain supplies, but they would be unlikely to take action much, if any, prior to the onset of open war between China and the US. Peking would have to expect to lose those imports if war did break out.

S-E-C-R-E-T

13. If it became clear after a time that China's move was limited, the reactions would abate somewhat. But only somewhat; anxiety about escalation would remain at a high level, and the US would be urged, repeatedly and vigorously, to make concessions.

14. In the event that China chose to precipitate a direct war with the US, the specter of a nuclear war would move/^{US allies in West Europe}to make strenuous efforts to bring the hostilities to an end through negotiation and compromise. All NATO governments would seek to exercise whatever influence they might have in Moscow, Washington, the UN, Peking, and Hanoi to this end. Very few would be willing to contribute to the US military effort, although Germany, the UK, possibly Italy, and others would continue to provide the US general diplomatic support. There would be genuine concern of the war spreading beyond Southeast Asia and escalating into a general war involving Europe, and even into a general nuclear war.

15. By applying extensive pressure, the US could probably get some token military support from the UK, and perhaps from one or two other NATO allies. If the allies, particularly the UK, believed that their participation could somehow prevent the possibility of the US using nuclear weapons their incentive to come in would be greater. Germany might provide token

- 8 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

numbers of troops if the legal problems could be overcome. France would not support the US, but would make strenuous diplomatic efforts to get the conflict to the conference table.

16. Australia and New Zealand, feeling their own security involved, would probably greatly increase their military participation, as would South Korea. The GRC on Taiwan would seek to use its forces on the mainland. Japan, on the other hand, would be severely shaken by the course of events. It would try to avoid being involved and would probably refuse the use of its territory for support of US military actions against China.

17. In short, there is little likelihood that the US could generate anything approaching the kind of international backing it received in the Korean War.

- 9 -

S-E-C-R-E-T